

First Sunday of Lent
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish,
Saint Francisville, LA
5 March 2017

Matthew 4:1-11

Have you ever been stuck in Traffic? I mean, really stuck? Unable to return to where you came from and unable to proceed to your destination, simply held in place by a force greater than yourself, namely the lines of vehicles in front, behind and on both sides of your car? Well, this same phenomenon can happen to us at an emotional and at an spiritual level. Let me give you an example: One of my childhood friends was haunted by the memory of his younger brother's death. He was 12 and his brother was 10 when they unsuspectingly swam into dangerous undercurrents at a local river. He tried his best to save his younger brother, a less experienced swimmer. He held him by his left hand for as long as he could, but at some point he was forced to let him go and his brother died. The memory of what he saw as his "failure" affected every major decision he made from then on. His life became a train wreck: two divorces, alcoholism, two suicide attempts, and a lengthy hospitalization at a psychiatric unit. He was stuck! Unable to go back and fix the problem and unable to move beyond it. It wasn't until he befriended a local priest and together they began to talk about the accident and began to pray for healing and self-forgiveness. Today he is a happily married priest helping others become unstuck in their relationships with God and others.

Many of us have been emotionally stuck before and some of us may actually be stuck right now. So deeply focused on a particular grievance or painful memory that we are simply unable to move beyond it. We wonder if we can ever be forgiven, if we can ever be able to forgive, if God is with us at all, and if our lives will ever get passed this painful event. Like one of those old scratched music records, we get up each day to the same obsessive rumination and phantasies. In our mind's eye we see ourselves going back in history and fixing the problem, moving our loved one out of danger's way, acting more humanly towards someone we have hurt, or simply doing whatever it is that we have to do to prevent the issue that got us stuck. Yet, we know that going back is impossible. The past is an unforgiving witness of our failures. It leaves us defeated and hopeless, at the dominion of our memories. And memory can be a most cruel judge.

If there is a memory that has remained permanently fixed in the Jewish mind during Jesus' time is the memory of the nation's failures in the wilderness, when God freed them from Egypt. The temptations of Jesus in the desert today, remind me of the temptations and the failures of God's first son, Israel. God called his first son out of Egypt, rescuing and liberating him from the grasp of the enemy. Yet, over and over again the nation failed God in the wilderness. They were tempted by their hunger, their fear, and their inability to see God present among them. Nostalgia over their time of slavery overtook any dream of a future in liberty. "If only we were back in Egypt!" Nostalgia makes the mind forget that "the good old days" were not really so good. Perhaps a phrase I once heard is true after all, "In the absence of the object the object becomes more real." Borrowing the title of a book I really enjoyed once, the Israelites suffer from "A failure of imagination." They fail to see God's larger plan of salvation, as they obsess about their present condition in the desert. This

failure of faith is often retold in the Old Testament. Writer after writer reflects on these experiences and attributes the nation's tragedies to their inability to remain obedient to God. At a time where absolute dependence on God was required, the nation listened to many voices other than God. They followed their own paths rather than God's path.

Now, centuries after the desert experience, the nation is still stuck in their disobedience. Spiritually they have not advanced one inch since the times of Moses. This in spite of the ministry of prophets, priests and kings. Often, it is precisely the actions of prophets, priests, and kings which gets the nation even more stuck in their disobedience. For the people of God to move forward, the desert failure needs to be resolved! Today, in the Gospel of Matthew, God's only "begotten" son goes willingly into the wilderness to be tested by God and tempted by Satan. He who was also called "out of Egypt" (Matthew 2:15) goes into the desert to accomplish what Israel, was unable to do: pass the obedience test.

The word used for temptation in this text also means "test". The idea that God tests us is well developed in Holy Scripture. He tested Abraham (Genesis 22:1), the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 16:4), and almost every major Bible Character. The reasons behind the test is not to trip up or to cause to fail, but rather to help the nation discern God's will, to diagnose their condition, and to help them make choices with clarity. In this sense, God's tests are similar to any Doctor's tests. They are meant to diagnose our human condition and to help us identify our needs. He tests us to see, "whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul" (Deuteronomy 10:12), and to see whether we will follow his instructions or not (Exodus 16:4).

God's begotten son is in the wilderness being tested by God and we are told that the devil uses this opportunity of test to tempt Jesus. Jesus responds to each temptation by quoting a Scriptural passage from the Nation's journey in the wilderness when they were called out of Egypt. The first temptation, "make these stones into bread" gets the following response from Deuteronomy 8:3, "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." The context of the verse is the time when the hungry people in the wilderness grumbled, cursed, wished to return to slavery, and turned against God and their leaders. The first Israel doubted God's provision whereas the New Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, willingly refuses any appeal to his divinity to provide for his needs supernaturally. He trusts that God will provide for his physical needs and he knows that there is much more to life than physical comfort. Seeking the Kingdom of God is more important than food and drink. Whereas the first Israel failed this test, Jesus the Christ, remains obedient to God by embracing fully his humanity.

The second temptation asks for a sign of Jesus' divinity. "Since you are the Son of God, throw yourself down..." Jesus' response comes from Deuteronomy 6:16, which reads, "Do not put the LORD your God to the test as you did at Massah." This verse is recalling a time when the Israelites attempted to manipulate God by saying, "If you are really among us, give us water... if you really love us, give us..." (Exodus 17:7). Even while God was providing ample proof of his love and his provision for them, Israel attempted to manipulate God. Similar to the manipulations of an ungrateful child, Israel wants God to prove his love for them through the satisfaction of all their needs. "If you really loved me, you would..."

Today, the enemy wants irrefutable proof that Jesus is the Messiah. He asks for a Superman-style sign. He tempts Jesus by misappropriating Scripture and quoting from Psalms that have nothing to do with suicidal behaviors, but rather have to do with God's loving provision for humanity. The temptation, "If you really are, then do..." is one that is familiar to the nation of Israel and to us today. We all want a provider God. We all tempt God, "God, if you really exist, give me... do for me... fix me... heal me..." Whereas Israel fails and tests God, Jesus remains faithful by interpreting Scripture rightly. "Do not tempt God!" Do not manipulate God. Do not say, "God, if you really love me..." Jesus the Christ, remains obedient to God by embracing fully his humanity, even when an appeal to his divinity would have been appropriate in his case. He was, after all, the Son of God.

In the third temptation, the devil says, "All this I give you if you worship me". Once again, Jesus responds by saying, "Away with you satan for it is written..." Then he paraphrases Deuteronomy 6:13: "The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear." Once again, this recalls the event when the Israelites carved for themselves false gods in the wilderness. They looked at the prosperity of other nations and asked in their hearts, "Why them and not us?" Perhaps they too could control their future by creating or adopting "provider-gods" and "fertility-gods". In an ironic twist, they moved away from the Creator God and become creators of gods. They failed in their ultimate test of obedience, which is none other than to trust God when nothing makes sense at all, when we are gripped by the depths of despair. To believe that God has a wider lens through which he sees the entire picture, and that our current situation is not the end of the story. It is always easy to believe in God when he is taking care of our needs and everything is going well. Whereas the courage of the Israelites failed and they worshiped idols, the New Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, refuses to worship anyone or anything other than God. This New Israel passes the test, he "fulfills all righteousness", as he promised John at his baptism. Jesus of Nazareth remains true to the end, and by doing so he accomplishes for the nation what the nation was unable to accomplish by themselves: he remains faithful and obedient. He gets the nation unstuck! They can now move forward in their relationship with God. The experience of disobedience doesn't have to control their lives anymore. The Son of God is faithful for all of us. Plain and simple, in Christ Israel is finally obedient, and freed from the chains of disobedience that kept it stuck. He does it for them!

How about us? How are we stuck? How is the evil one, the enemy, tempting us today? I believe we are tempted today with the same temptations the nation was tempted then, and Jesus was tempted in his own day. The enemy tempts us with good things, but he convinces us that these things are all there is, they are ends in themselves. Physical comfort (food, clothing, shelter...) are all there is and nothing else matters. Fame, recognition, adulation are all there is and nothing else matters. Unlimited power, control, dominion, and status are all there is and nothing else matters. The list is unlimited. The enemy takes good things which God has given us as gifts and uses them as weapons against us to distance ourselves from God and convince us that God does not really exist and we can manage just fine without him. The good news for us today is that Jesus conquers all temptations! He did it for his nation and he will do it for us. With him in our corner there is no attack and no temptation that can ever overtake us. Trust in him and don't be afraid!